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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 000641

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LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

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TAGS: [KPAO PREL](#) [QA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)  
SUBJECT: BEGINNING OF THE END? KHANFAR STILL AT THE HELM OF  
AL JAZEERA, BUT STRIPPED OF FINANCIAL AND ADMIN POWERS

REF: DOHA 495

Classified By: Ambassador Chase Untermeyer, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

11. (C) Summary: Wadah Khanfar remains Director-General of the Al Jazeera Network (AJN), but no longer has responsibility for financial and administrative issues. Although Khanfar placed a positive spin on the recent AJN board reshuffle in a meeting with Emboffs, our assessment is that his position has been greatly weakened, probably irretrievably so. End summary

12. (C) Following the reshuffle of the AJN board reported reftel, DCM and PAO met June 18 with Wadah Khanfar, Director General of AJN and Managing Director of Al Jazeera Arabic, and with Hamad Al Kuwari, newly appointed AJN board member, Qatar's last Information Minister and a former Ambassador to Washington.

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KHANFAR SPINS THE STORY: IT WAS ALL HIS IDEA  
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13. (C) When asked about the significance of the changes on the board, particularly the appointment of one of the Board Members, Ahmed Al Kholaiifi, to the new position of vice chairman responsible for oversight over the daily operations of the network, Khanfar laughed and said that there have been a whole slew of dramatic conspiracy theories explaining his removal from the board. In fact, he said, the decision was one of practical efficiency. He confirmed that Al Kholaiifi has taken over day-to-day oversight of financial and administrative issues for the network, and claimed the appointment was the result of a suggestion he himself had made in March this year. Underlining the fact that Al Kholaiifi is a Qatari, he said the decision was partly a response to a local newspaper campaign earlier this year (reftel) attacking Al Jazeera and Khanfar for ignoring Qataris in hiring and promotion practices.

14. (C) Khanfar said the daily administrative demands on his time have made it difficult for him to focus on strategic projects for developing and expanding the network. Having Al Kholaiifi on board in his new capacity would free him up to do so. He then went on to say, however, that his ability to focus on these new projects is also hijacked by the demands of running the Arabic channel, which consist of one urgent claim on his time after another, allowing little time for strategic thinking. He claimed to be looking seriously for a replacement for himself at the head of the Arabic channel.

15. (C) Khanfar noted casually that "no-one can be head of a network like this forever," giving the example of the BBC network, which has, he said, a five-year term on the position of director, allowing a constant renewal of vision at the top. When asked what he would like to do "after Al Jazeera," he mentioned training and consulting as possibilities.

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AL KUWARI: I AM STILL LEARNING; THIS IS A BIG PROJECT  
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16. (C) A close contact of the mission, Qatar's last information minister and a Qatari ambassador to Washington and the UN for ten years prior to that, Hamad Al Kuwari has been running his Bin Omran Group for the past ten years, dealing in road-building, construction and real estate. He told Emboffs the AJN board appointment came as a surprise to him but (as is usual in cases of Amiri appointments) he considered the request to serve by the Amir an offer that could not be refused.

17. (C) He told Emboffs he is in learning mode and was seeking their input, at which DCM gave a brief summary of the history of USG-Qatar relations as they relate to Al Jazeera, and USG priorities in this regard. Al Kuwari was clearly disposed to defend Al Jazeera and its track record and made the case that Al Jazeera has been at the forefront of significant and positive changes in the media landscape of the region. He repeated several times that Al Jazeera is editorially independent and cannot be pressured by the Qatari government, at the express wish of the Amir - contrary to what Arab and other governments believe. He reiterated Khanfar's point concerning the importance of a Qatari (Ahmed Al Kholafi) being placed in charge of financial and administrative issues

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for Al Jazeera.

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) Although as engaging as ever, Khanfar did not exude his usual aura of power and confidence. Although he rattled off a few of the "strategic" projects for developing the network (new media, newspaper, magazines, etc.) his discourse was not convincing, in that he did not focus on them or describe them with the energy one would expect from one who had just been freed up to do what he considered the most important work. Khanfar also referred to the influential Hamad Al Kuwari as "a good friend of mine," saying "I know him well," while at a meeting later that day, Al Kuwari told Emboffs he barely knew Khanfar, beyond meeting him "four or five times at receptions." Khanfar's relatively mild deception here gave his already improbable spin an even more improbable cast.

19. (C) It is too early to tell in what direction the new board will take the network, particularly the Arabic channel. However, it is increasingly clear that the chief preoccupation of the new board - and of the Amir in making the changes on the board - was not the editorial content of Al Jazeera but the network's financial, administrative, and personnel practices.  
RATNEY